



Nasr Abu Zaid

The politics of the interpretation of the Quran lie at the heart of the Abu Zaid case. In the eyes of orthodox Islam, the Quran is the eternal word of God. As it always existed, it was never created. That this eternal text should have been revealed to the Prophet Mohammed in seventh-century Arabia has no bearing on the meaning of the Quran, which is a book to be read literally and holds true for all times. Consequently there is no tradition of textual criticism of the Quran analogous to those for the Hebrew Bible and New Testament.

However, this orthodox view has been challenged by Islamic scholars over the centuries. A rationalist school emerged in the ninth century under the Abbasid Empire, known as the Mu'tazilites, whose doctrines fused notions of social justice with a purified, spiritualised monotheism. They argued for a created Quran by distinguishing between God's essence, which they held to be eternal and beyond human understanding, and His word, which is created and accessible to reason.

While the Mu'tazilites were marginalised after two decades, their thought remained influential down to the present, as evinced in the writings of Abu Zaid himself. Here he sets out the evolution of his scholarship from the beginning of his career as a graduate student to his most recent scholarly works. Abu Zaid has applied contemporary methods of textual criticism to his study of the Quran, contextualising the book in its historical setting. This challenge to orthodoxy, he argues, has been used as a pretext by those who perhaps had more personal reasons to seek his downfall

There are many aspects to the story of Abu Zaid.

Let us take first the academic aspect. This covers the need to raise new questions if knowledge in any given field is to be advanced.

A second aspect concerns the political implications of such scholarship when the subject matter in question is a religion, namely Islam, frequently subjected to political manipulation during its long history. Given the present social and political state of the entire Muslim world, and the plethora of Islamist political movements, any critical approach to Islamic thought is condemned and the life of its perpetrator endangered.

The third and last aspect is a personal one. This will not be explored here.

Abu Zaid began his career as an assistant teacher in the department of Arabic, Faculty of Letters, Cairo University immediately after graduation in 1972. Though highly unusual, the department committee decided that the newly appointed assistant should take 'Islamic Studies' as his major field of research in both his Masters and PhD theses. The faculty committee approved the decision.

It is important at this point to record that the decision in question was intended to convince Abu Zaid, himself reluctant to major in this subject, that the need for a specialist in Islamic studies was most urgent. Abu Zaid's reluctance was based on the rejection of a PhD thesis on Islamic studies presented to the department 25 years earlier by Muhammad Ahmad Khalafallah. At the time, Khalafallah was an assistant under the supervision of professor Amin al-Khuly. His thesis, *The Art of Narration in the Quran*, subjects the text to a literary approach formulated by his professor. The university refuted the thesis after a heated debate on the validity of such an approach to the Muslim holy book.

Similar debates followed the publication of Ali Abd al-Razik's *Islam and the Principles of Political Authority* in 1925 and Taha Husayn's *Pre-Islamic Poetry* in 1928. Following the rejection of his thesis, Khalafallah was transferred to a non-teaching job in the ministry of education; his professor was forbidden to teach or supervise Islamic Studies. Five years later, in 1954, a government decree forced Amin al-Khuly into retirement along with many other professors. This decision, initiated by the new military authority, ironically called 'The Free Officers Movement', was presented to the public as part of a revolutionary process intended to remove corruption from Egyptian society and to 'cleanse the universities'. The chair of Islamic Studies fell vacant; teaching at the undergraduate level fell to any professor interested in teaching it.

Aware of the consequences that might follow the application of any non-traditional method to Islamic studies, Abu Zaid tried in vain to convey his fears on the risks implicit in majoring in Islamic studies to the department committee. The department countered by stressing the need to appoint a specialist to the long-abandoned chair in Islamic studies for instruction in Islamic studies.

At this point, Abu Zaid gave up his objections and set about examining the different methods of interpretation historically applied to the text of the Quran. Starting with the concept of 'metaphor' introduced to Arabic Rhetoric by the rationalist Mutazilite school of theology. Abu Zaid took 'The Concept of Metaphor As Applied to The Quran by The Mu'tazilites' as the subject of his masters thesis. This was later published as *The Rational Exegesis of the Quran* (First ed Beirut 1982, fourth ed 1996.)

After four years of analysing and comparing the discourse of the Mu'tazilites and their critics, Abu Zaid concluded that the Quran was the site of a fierce intellectual and political battle. Battle was joined at one of the most important junctures in the structure of the Quranic text (Chap III v 7): the point at which, unambiguous verses (ayaat muhkamat), the backbone of the Book, confront ambiguous verses (ayat mutashabihaat), the latter to be interpreted in the light of the former. While the Mu'tazilites and their opponents agree on principle, in practice they part company. The controversy revolves around the meaning of the Quran as well as its structure: what the Mu'tazilites considered 'unambiguous' their opponents considered 'ambiguous' and vice versa.

The intellectual battle was the ultimate expression of a socio-political struggle involving different world views. Seeking an interpretative framework ostensibly devoid of political interests, Abu Zaid chose for his doctoral research to study the hermeneutics of the Quran

within a Sufi, or mystical Islamic context. Accordingly, the subject of Abu Zaid's PhD thesis was *The Hermeneutics of the Quran by Muhiy Al-Deen Ibn Arabi*. Ibn Arabi, a great Andalusian Sufi, was born in Spain and wrote his greatest treatise, *Al-Futuhat Al-Makkiah* (The Meccan Revelation) in Mecca, and died in Syria in 638 H (1279 AD).

In the process, Abu Zaid came to much the same conclusion as before: namely, all interpretation is informed by contemporary socio-political and cultural factors. Ibn Arabi's purpose was to incorporate into Quranic interpretation the advances in knowledge up to and including contemporary developments. He wanted to ensure that Islam was an open-ended faith, one that could reconcile itself to, and indeed incorporated, Christianity, Judaism and all other religions. It was to be the 'religion of comprehensive love' described by Ibn Arabi in his poetry. His methodology was very much a product of contemporary Andalusian society based on its linguistic, cultural and ethnic pluralism: Provençale was spoken in the streets, Latin in the Church, classical Arabic in the court and a multitude of local dialects elsewhere. Ibn Arabi sought to reconcile all elements and groups.

Needless to say, the project failed. Ibn Arabi's attempt to construct a personal utopia was driven by the increasing tension and conflict within his society. Abu Zaid's thesis on Ibn Arabi was published as *The Philosophy of Hermeneutics* (First ed Beirut 1983, third ed 1996.)

As an Egyptian, Abu Zaid witnessed a similar conflict over the meaning of Islam in contemporary religious discourse, particularly the rival interpretations of Islam in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1960s, the dominant religious discourse presented Islam as the religion of social justice, urging its followers to fight imperialism and Zionism. In the 1970s, with the open door economic policy and the peace with Israel, Islam became the religion that guarded private property and urged Muslims to make peace with the Israelis.

The chances of ever escaping the impasse created by this pragmatic exegesis of the Quran began to exercise Abu Zaid. And even if it were practically feasible, how could it be done? Being by now acutely aware that the interpretation of the Quran is not and has never been an innocent pursuit devoid of socio-political and cultural impact; and that at times it goes even further and becomes deliberate political manipulation of the text, Abu Zaid nevertheless put the 'Concept of the Text' back at the centre of his academic research.

The result this research was a third book, *Mafhum Al-Nass; Dirasah fi Ulum Al-Quran* (The Concept of the Text: a study of the sciences of the Quran), first published in Cairo in 1990 with many subsequent editions in Beirut and Casablanca. It proposed that before dealing with questions of interpretation, one must first define the nature of the text and, since the way should not be left open for any and every interpretation, examine the rules governing the study of that text.

The study of modern hermeneutics had revealed to Abu Zaid the dangers of leaving a religious text prey to interpretation by all and sundry. Religious texts, especially in Islam, profoundly influence social and cultural life. Scholars of religious texts have to set out

the limits of certainty and the interpretative scope of such texts if they are not to be reduced to vehicles for competing ideologies. And, in the process, religion may be perverted from its true purpose: the good of humanity in this world and the next.

No text comes free of historical context. As text, the Quran is no exception and is, therefore, a proper subject for interpretation. Indeed, throughout its history, the Quran has been the subject of various schools of interpretation. Abu Zaid set out to investigate these within their historical context.

To say that the Quran is an historical text in no way implies that its origins are human. However, given that God's eternal word was revealed to Mohammed in seventh century Arabia at a specific time and place, this makes it an historical text. Whereas God's eternal word exists in a sphere beyond human knowledge, an historical text may be subject to historical interpretation and understanding. Just as the Mu'tazilites, Ash'arites, Shi'ites and Sufis historically used their different methods of interpretation to serve particular socio-political ends, so it could be demonstrated that contemporary religio-political discourse was doing precisely the same.

Abu Zaid, scholar and citizen, dreaming of a better future for his country and its people, as well as progress within the Islamic world, felt himself under a compulsion to examine modern Islamic discourse. His critical analysis was published as *Naqd al-Khitab Al-Diny* (Critique of Islamic Discourse) in Cairo in 1992, with a third edition in 1996. This was the book that began all Abu Zaid's troubles.

In May 1992, Abu Zaid applied to the department of Arabic studies for promotion to full professor. His previous five years' academic output, 11 papers and two books, was submitted to an advisory committee responsible for evaluating the level of scholarship and forwarding a report with its recommendations to the dean of the faculty.

Departmental professors are also given copies of the report informing them of the committee's decision and inviting comment.

It took the committee almost seven months - rather than the statutory three - to reach its decision. It was 3 December before departmental professors finally received its recommendation to reject Abu Zaid's promotion.

Meanwhile, word had got out that far from being the unanimous verdict claimed in the report itself, the rejection had got through by the narrowest of margins: seven against; six in favour. Furthermore, it came out that of the three experts consulted by the committee, two declared strongly in Abu Zaid's favour. However, and despite the protest of certain committee members who refused to endorse the report, the minority opinion prevailed. The decision of the committee, as for much that followed, was the result of social and political pressures from outside. Only the fear that characterises any discussion of religious matters [in Egypt] explains the farce that went on inside the committee that resulted in the majority being terrorised into silence by one voice.

Yet we should be remiss if we did not also note the personal animosity that crept in to what should have been an objective, scholarly assessment of Abu Zaid's work. For one committee member, Dr Abd el-Sabour Shahin, personal revenge clouded academic

judgement to the point where he not only voted against Abu Zaid's appointment, he had him labelled an apostate.

The trouble began with the introductory pages to *Critique of Islamic Discourse* in which the author criticises the so-called 'Islamic investment companies' that had been set up as alternatives to the usurious and unislamic practices of the modern, western banking sector.

Now it happened that Shahin, the dissenting voice among the Islamic experts consulted by the committee, was also the religious advisor to one of these 'Islamic' institutions that had featured at the centre of a great public scandal in 1988. With his own reputation at stake, it would seem that Shahin attempted to save his own skin by using what should have been a purely academic report on Abu Zaid's scholarship to discredit his authority as a Muslim by labelling him an apostate.

According to Abu Zaid, it was only the endorsement of exponents of 'political Islam' like Shahin, in company with prominent representatives of orthodox Islam led by the rector of Al-Azhar, the late Gad Al-Haqui 'Ali Gad Al-Haqui, that enabled these institutions successfully to carry out the biggest financial swindle in modern Egyptian banking history. Trusting in these experts and their exploitation of Islam, hundreds of thousands of Egyptians lost their entire savings. While the former were busy attacking the interest rates charged by the modern banking system, there was a good deal of self interest at work in the rival Islamic companies.

Abu Zaid's introductory observations were to Shahin as a red rag to a bull. His 'academic' report neither took account of the remaining chapters of *Critique of Islamic Discourse*, nor its methodology. Once they had seen the report, the department professors rose up in protest. In a letter to the dean supporting Abu Zaid's promotion, they objected to the contents as well as the tenor of the report. Shahin, they argued, had neither kept abreast of scholarly research, nor familiarised himself with theoretical developments such as semiotics. Moreover, he had either not read - or failed to appreciate - Abu Zaid's full body of work. The departmental committee also agreed, unanimously, that in failing to carry out an objective, scholarly evaluation and taking up matters of dogma, Shahin's report exceeded the scope of the promotion committee's brief 'to investigate exclusively the scholarly production without concern for any other consideration'. As was evident from its language, the report was passing judgement on Abu Zaid's faith rather than his academic credentials.

Academically, matters came to a head when all the documents in the case of Abu Zaid - the report of the academic committee rejecting the appointment, the departmental opinion in Abu Zaid's favour and the faculty committee's endorsement of this - were presented for a final decision to the rector of Cairo University.

Once again, intellectual terrorism prevailed over justice. Anxious at all costs to avoid either a stand off with the Islamists, or offending the government on whom his job - like all state university rectors - depended, and who, at the time, were taking a soft line on Islamic terrorism, Dr Ma'mun Salama, chose to regard the affair as an everyday case of a failed academic promotion rather than as a threat to academic values and freedoms.

Easier - and safer too for all concerned, he judged - to advise Abu Zaid quietly to 'try again later' when he could be sure of promotion, than to risk a confrontation with the Islamists in the university or jeopardise the government's attempt at compromise with them.

Dr Salama could not have been more wrong. Abu Zaid was not saved from the wrath of the Islamists; academic freedom and the reputation of Cairo University suffered a serious setback. Only two weeks after the university's decision not to confer a full professorship on Abu Zaid, Shahin used the pulpit of a central Cairo mosque, Amr Ibn Al-Aas mosque, publicly to proclaim Abu Zaid an apostate. That was on Friday 2 April 1993. The following Friday, mosques throughout Egypt followed suit. These even included the small mosque in Abu Zaid's home village, close to the city of Tanta, capital of the Delta, whose preacher had grown up and gone to the same kuttab - traditional Quranic school - as Abu Zaid where they had learned and memorised the Quran together. For him, as for so many others, Shahin was a reliable authority, beyond question. Had not the university itself added to his credibility by endorsing his verdict?

It needed only one person, it seems, to lead a venomous campaign not only against an individual called Abu Zaid, but against the entire intellectual tradition presented in his work. Even so, things could not have taken the course they did, had we not reached a point at which certain individuals are treated as sacrosanct: men protected by God himself, against error and above the law. There are those whose understanding and exposition of religion enjoys a near sacred authority simply because they stick to time-worn views, never questioning but repeating endlessly what has been said for centuries. Given this intellectual stagnation, it is easy to brand any breath of fresh air in the form of new explanations or interpretations of religion as blasphemous. Proof of apostasy needs only the demonstration that non-traditional methods of investigation have been used.

Once Abu Zaid's apostasy had been trumpeted from the pulpit, the next step was to prove it in court. The plot to do this was hatched in a mosque in the Pyramids neighbourhood. Its preacher, a teacher with Shahin at Dar al-Ulum, and one of his followers, proposed to take the issue to the Family Court. He argued that the marriage of Abu Zaid to his wife Dr Ebtahal Yunes, an associate professor of French civilisation in her husband's faculty at the university, should be annulled on the grounds that Islamic law forbids the marriage of an apostate to a Muslim. In a book distributed free inside the university to Abu Zaid's students, Shahin's disciple writes that he consulted the dean of Dar al-Ulum and a former minister of culture, now a professor, about his lawsuit. Once their blessing was secured, Islamist lawyers volunteered their services and funds were collected to cover other expenses.

Abu Zaid's opponents made it clear from the outset that the marital status of Abu Zaid was of less concern than getting his apostasy legally confirmed by the state. To do so, they took advantage of a loophole in the Family Code, otherwise integrated within the Secular Egyptian Civil Code, to introduce cases in Islamic personal status law or hisbah. On the precedent of a centuries-old Islamic ruling that disallows the marriage of a Muslim to a non-Muslim, a group of Islamist lawyers petitioned for the divorce of Abu

Zaid from Ebtehal Yunes. (Index 7/1993). Such a ruling would confirm Abu Zaid's status as an apostate and allow his opponents to press for his dismissal from the university.

On 15 April 1993, the supposedly 'moderate' Islamic weekly *Al-Liwa' al-Islami*, founded by the ruling National Democratic Party to counter religious extremism and terrorism, ran an editorial fulminating against the 'heretic' Abu Zaid who had endangered the faith of his students and urging the rector of the university to fire him. A week later, the same paper counselled the government that 'execution' was the only fitting penalty for Abu Zaid and that it should apply the provisions of the Islamic penal code immediately. On top of this came the pronouncement from Sheikh Mohammed el-Ghazali, a leading authority among Islamists, during the trial of the assassins of Farag Fouda (Index 7/1992 & 7/1993): if the state did not do its religious duty, he opined, it was the duty of every Muslim to execute the punishment. The covert aim of the Islamists was to have Abu Zaid legally killed in the name of Islam. On 27 January 1994, the judge in the First Grade Family Court ruled the case inadmissible because the plaintiff had insufficient personal grievance with Abu Zaid. The decision was challenged in the court of appeal and overturned. The Islamists succeeded in having Abu Zaid's apostasy confirmed and his marriage officially annulled.

Abu Zaid took his case to the Court of Cassation, Egypt's final court of appeal. The case is now in court. There is no recourse beyond its decision.

His case generated widespread public protest and attracted media and human rights interest worldwide.

Meanwhile, the price Abu Zaid and Ebtehal Yunes have paid for taking on their enemies in court and opposing any manipulation of Islam, is flight from Egypt and all that entails: the loss of country, home, students and colleagues.
